



## Seafood and Slavery: Human Trafficking in the Fishing Industry

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### EXPERIENCE

Many of us have learned by now to look for the “dolphin safe” label on tuna fish cans, to limit unnecessary harm to those innocent creatures. Still, however, many remain unaware of – or apathetic to – the perils to innocent human life that our seafood purchases can facilitate. In light of this, we should recall the words of Pope Francis: “A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings. It is clearly inconsistent to combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining completely indifferent to human trafficking, unconcerned about the poor, or undertaking to destroy another human being deemed unwanted.”<sup>1</sup> According to the most recent estimates by the International Labor Organization (ILO), “Nearly 25 million workers in 2016 were in some form of slavery. One in ten of those workers was in the fishing and agriculture industries.”<sup>2</sup> Because of this, it is a commonplace occurrence that a “fish caught with slave labor enters the complex global supply chain, where it mingles with or is fed to legal seafood products and ends up on [our] plates.”<sup>3</sup>

The fishing industry is considered one of the most dangerous in the world,<sup>4</sup> and this, coupled with the difficulty in imposing regulations, engenders frequent and brutal forced labor among fishing crews. When the United Nations Office on Drugs and

Crime (UNODC) published an issue paper on trafficking in the fishing industry, the editor noted that “the most disturbing finding of the study was the severity of the abuse of fishers [men, women, and children] trafficked for the purpose of forced labour on board fishing vessels.”<sup>5</sup>

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- U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking

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### **The Vulnerability of Migrants and Refugees, Worldwide**

Migrant workers and refugees are especially vulnerable to trafficking due to their insecurity and unfamiliarity with their surroundings. In Southeast Asia, where the problem is particularly evident, workers are recruited under false pretenses and kept at sea for months or years at a time, in horrid conditions, with little or no remuneration. For example, Rohingya migrants and refugees, after fleeing ethnic cleansing perpetrated by their government, have been “trafficked through deadly jungle camps [and] sold to Thai fishing vessels as slaves to produce seafood sold across the world.”<sup>6</sup>

One victim of trafficking recalls being awoken every morning at 2am and forced to peel shrimp for 16 hours straight, alongside women and children.<sup>7</sup> The UNODC also tells us of an illiterate Nepalese fisher, who signed a contract pledging to “work hard, obediently and diligently” for approximately 20 hours/day for three years, with an average pay of 37 cents per hour (with payment to be withheld at various times). The contract obliged him to pay recruitment and repatriation fees (“minimum \$2000”), making the crewmember a possible victim of debt bondage<sup>8</sup> – i.e. he would owe more money than he earned by the end of his contract, so his “employer” could make him stay to work off his “debt.”



The problem is a global one and no country is immune to it. In Hawaii, for example, there is a large-scale operation in which undocumented migrant workers – often victims of trafficking and/or abuse – form the majority of fishing crews and are forced to live on the boats in squalor, unable to disembark. They are grossly underpaid, and sometimes denied access to such necessities as food, water, and sanitation.<sup>9</sup> Hawaiian restaurants purchase the fish and sell it for large profits, advertising it as “sustainable and locally-caught.”<sup>10</sup> In Maryland, too, seafood is one of the state’s largest employment sectors, but it is fraught with trafficked workers and workers’ rights violations. “Low wages, erratic work hours, and paycheck deductions were the norm among the women interviewed” in the Maryland crab industry.<sup>11</sup> These scenarios are not uncommon in the fishing industry, which is notoriously difficult to monitor.

## ANALYSIS

Human trafficking is defined as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”<sup>12</sup> It is a modern-day form of slavery that occurs throughout the world, affecting people of all ages, genders, and races, in nearly every line of work. As the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) notes, however, “The virtually unregulated fishing industry in many countries, coupled with the global demand for cheap seafood, create the lawless conditions under which trafficking at sea flourishes.”<sup>13</sup>

*Human trafficking is modern-day slavery!*

To counteract the lawlessness in the fishing industry and limit the occurrence of trafficking and abuse, the ILO recently put forth the Work in Fishing Convention. The Convention (No. 188) “helps prevent unacceptable forms of work for all fishers, especially migrant fishers. It provides for regulation of the recruitment process and investigation of complaints by fishers.”<sup>14</sup> The ILO is urging all states to ratify the Convention, claiming, “If governments and consumers are seriously concerned about the treatment of certain fishers, about the working and living conditions under which their seafood is produced, about safety at sea in fishing in general, the number of ratifications must go up rapidly, especially in areas of the world where the protection of fishers is below the minimum standards this Convention sets.”<sup>15</sup> Currently, only 10 member countries have ratified the Convention – the United States and Canada are not among them.<sup>16</sup>

### **Regulations in the U.S.**

Further, U.S. federal rules require citizens to account for 75 percent of the crew on most American vessels, but a legal loophole exempts commercial

fishing boats from complying, which enables undocumented workers to comprise fishing crews in Hawaii.<sup>17</sup> They have no legal standing, so these fishing crews are at the mercy of their captains since they are not protected by the labor laws that cover most American workers. According to Kathryn Xian, of the Pacific Alliance to Stop Slavery, “Most of the fish caught and sold in Hawaii is done by the use of exploiting migrant workers in what looks to be a human trafficking scheme legitimized by our own laws.”<sup>18</sup> While the U.S. is a world leader in the fight against human trafficking and has adopted influential policies to prevent trafficking in the fishing industry, specifically,<sup>19</sup> these examples show the extent to which forced labor practices are embedded in even the most proactive nations.

### Keys to Ending Trafficking in Seafood

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*Consumers drive the demand for slave labor!*

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Beyond closing such loopholes, the U.S. State Department notes that the “keys to tackling IUU [illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing] include finding ways to deprive IUU fishers of the economic incentives that drive IUU fishing, ensuring States effectively monitor and control their fishing vessels, and building capacity for enforcement and good governance in developing States.”<sup>20</sup> Assistance in taking these steps will be especially important for countries that do not have the resources to implement regulations (or to deal with the economic consequences of doing so). In Thailand, for example, pressure from the international community has caused the government to implement stricter regulations on the fishing industry. Because of this, the price of seafood is rising, making it more difficult to purchase, and many fishing vessels are remaining docked due to fearing fines for not complying fully with the new regulations.<sup>21</sup> According to *The Guardian*, “These reforms, coupled with decades of overfishing and ecological destruction that has pushed fish stocks to the brink, mean they are increasingly unable to make a living. Instead, they are increasingly turning to another line of business: people trafficking.”<sup>22</sup>

On the consumption end of the supply chain, it is important to note that about 90 percent of seafood served in American homes is imported; and, further, according to [a World Wildlife Fund \(WWF\) study](#) from 2015, IUU secures more than 85% of the world’s fish stocks. This makes it highly likely that the fish we eat has been tarnished by slave labor.<sup>23</sup> Thus, consumers are at least partly responsible for driving the demand for forced labor.

### REFLECTION

Slavery runs contrary to every principle of Catholic social thought (CST) – most obviously, perhaps, the protection of life and the inherent dignity of every person, but also to the closely-related principle of the dignity of work and workers’ rights.

Pope Francis reminds us that “any approach to an integral ecology, which by definition does not exclude human beings, needs to take account of the value of labour.”<sup>24</sup> This is because work is part of the original vocation of human beings, who were called to “cultivate and care for” the Earth. Through work, human beings express themselves and reflect the

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*-Pope Francis*

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image of God by participating in God’s creative activity. When we devalue the work performed by human beings, then, we deny a critical aspect of their dignity. Pope Francis explains, “Today, as in the past, slavery is rooted in a notion of the human person which allows him or her to be treated as an object. Whenever sin corrupts the human heart and distances us from our Creator and our neighbours, the latter are no longer regarded as beings of equal dignity, as brothers or sisters sharing a common humanity, but rather as objects.”<sup>25</sup>

Catholic social thought thus maintains that “every person ought to have the awareness that ‘purchasing is always a moral – and not simply an economic – act.’”<sup>26</sup> When we purchase food that has been produced by forced labor, we ourselves are complicit in the enslavement of those workers. Further, CST maintains, “Businesses have a duty to ensure dignified working conditions and adequate salaries for their employees, [and] they must also be vigilant that forms of subjugation or human trafficking do not find their way into the distribution chain.”<sup>27</sup> Both businesses and consumers must exercise “social responsibility” to ensure that their activity in the world builds up the Kingdom of God. When we fail to exercise social responsibility, we fail to stand in solidarity with our oppressed brothers and sisters. Solidarity, of course, is also a bedrock principle of CST, which commends to each of us the care of others, for “we are all really responsible for all.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Saint Augustine and Human Trafficking**

Saint Augustine, an advocate against human trafficking in his time, also teaches that slavery is the result of human sin, for God “did not wish the rational being, made in [God’s] own image, to have dominion” over another.<sup>29</sup> We read in Saint Augustine’s letters his dismay over the slave trade that was occurring in Africa in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, his description of the practice could describe that of today. He writes of large numbers of slave traders, who “are draining the province of its human population on a huge scale by purchasing people and transporting them to provinces overseas (2),” and he asserts that “this mob of merchants has spawned a mob of abductors and pillagers ... [who] carry off people by force to sell them to those merchants” (ibid). The traffickers, he writes, “take captives from anywhere and everywhere, some forcibly abducted and some deceived by trickery, into the hands of anyone promising the price” (5).

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*Because we reflect the Triune God, we are constituted by our relationships. Thus, we only can flourish when we relate rightly to others, loving them – and, hence, acting toward them – in a manner befitting their dignity.*

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“On hearing about the various misfortunes that had led the rest of them to the [slave traders], via their abductors and kidnappers,” Augustine recalls, “hardly one of us could restrain his tears (ibid).”

Augustine notes that “the examples of this outrage that I have encountered are too many for me to list (7),” and he urgently calls for regulation to prevent the abominable practice. Importantly, however, he expresses concern for the traffickers, and advocates for penalties that will contribute to their reform and will not irreparably harm them (4). Recognizing the human

propensity to greed, Augustine includes in his letter this exhortation to action: “If we [the Church] do nothing for [the slaves], it will not be at all easy to find any coastal authority who, as a Christian or as a human being, will take pity on any of them” (ibid).

On Augustine’s view, human beings, made in the image of God, are equal in dignity and godness, and so deserve equal love. Further, because we reflect the Triune God, we are constituted by our relationships. Thus, we only can flourish when we relate rightly to others, loving them – and, hence, acting toward them – in a manner befitting their dignity.

### **ACTION**

Pope Francis has issued an urgent appeal “to all men and women of good will, and all those near or far, including the highest levels of civil institutions, who witness the scourge of contemporary slavery, not to become accomplices to this evil, not to turn away from the sufferings of our brothers and sisters, our fellow human beings, who are deprived of their freedom and dignity. Instead, may we have the courage to touch the suffering flesh of Christ, revealed in the faces of those countless persons whom he calls ‘the least of these my brethren’ (Mt 25:40, 45).”<sup>31</sup>

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*Purchasing is always a moral – and not simply an economic – act.*  
-Pope Benedict XVI

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To respond to this appeal, below are some suggested actions:

- [Pray for an end to all human trafficking.](#)
- Exercise social responsibility! Be willing to sacrifice a bit of your time to research the supply chains of companies, and a bit of your income to purchase goods that are Fair Trade Certified or otherwise known to be slavery-free.
  - Purchase fish from Target, Whole Foods, Wegman’s, Trader Joe’s, Aldi, or Safeway – all of which are [highly ranked by Greenpeace](#) for their commitment to sustainable and transparent fishing practices.
  - Visit [www.slaveryfootprint.org](http://www.slaveryfootprint.org), the [Marine Stewardship Council](#), or <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/oceans/tuna-guide/> to get started.
- Invest only in companies whose supply chains are fully transparent and do not take advantage of forced labor.
  - Visit [the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility](#) for more information.
- Contact your government officials to urge them to adopt policies that prevent human trafficking.
  - For U.S. Citizens
    - Urge the adoption of the Business Supply Chain Transparency on Trafficking and Slavery Act of 2015 (S. 1968/H.R. 3226).
    - Urge your officials not to eliminate grant-funding for International Labor Affairs (ILAB) because these grants help protect against forced labor and child labor.
    - Urge your officials to support the ratification of ILO Convention 188.
  - For Canadian Citizens
    - [Sign this petition](#) to urge your government to adopt measures ensuring that “all fish sold in Canada [is] legally caught, honestly labelled and fully traceable.”
    - Urge your officials to support the ratification of ILO Convention 188.
- Donate to the USCCB’s [Coalition of Organizations and Ministries Promoting the Abolition of Slavery at Sea \(COMPASS\)](#).
  - If in New York, Florida, or the District of Columbia, donate online. If you are in another state, please go to the [Catholic Fund against Human Trafficking](#).
- Visit [End Slavery Now](#) and [Through God’s Grace](#) for more resources and suggested actions.

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<sup>1</sup> *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical letter on care for our common home, Vatican Web site, May 24, 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papafrancesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papafrancesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), §91.

<sup>2</sup> Ship to Shore Rights, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://shiptoshorerights.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking, "How Slave Labor Feeds the Supply Chain," *Stop Trafficking: Anti-Human Trafficking Newsletter*, March 2018, 2.

<sup>4</sup> "ILO Work in Fishing Convention No.188 (2007) enters into force," International Labour Organization, last modified November 16, 2017, [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_596898/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_596898/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), comp., *Transnational Organized Crime in the Fishing Industry* (Vienna: United Nations, 2011), [http://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Issue\\_Paper\\_-\\_TOC\\_in\\_the\\_Fishing\\_Industry.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Issue_Paper_-_TOC_in_the_Fishing_Industry.pdf), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Emanuel Stoakes, Chris Kelly, and Annie Kelly, "Revealed: how the Thai fishing industry trafficks, imprisons and enslaves," *The Guardian*, July 20, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jul/20/thai-fishing-industry-implicated-enslavement-deaths-rohingya>.

<sup>7</sup> Margie Mason, "Global supermarkets selling shrimp peeled by slaves," *Associated Press*, December 14, 2015, <https://apnews.com/8f64fb25931242a985bc30e3f5a9a0b2/ap-global-supermarkets-selling-shrimp-peeled-slaves>.

<sup>8</sup> UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Martha Mendoza and Margie Mason, "Hawaiian seafood caught by foreign crews confined on boats," *Associated Press*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.ap.org/explore/seafood-from-slaves/hawaiian-seafood-caught-foreign-crews-confined-boats.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> American University Washington College of Law International Human Rights Law Clinic & *Centro de los Derechos del Migrante*, "Picked Apart: The Hidden Struggles of Migrant Worker Women in the Maryland Crab Industry" (Washington, DC: American University Washington College of Law and *Centro de los Derechos del Migrante*, 2010), [digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=fasch\\_rpt](http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=fasch_rpt).

<sup>12</sup> UNODC, "Human Trafficking," United Nations, accessed May 5, 2018, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html?ref=menuaside>.

<sup>13</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), "Coalition of Organizations and Ministries Promoting the Abolition of Slavery at Sea (COMPASS)," accessed May 5, 2018, <http://www.usccb.org/about/anti-trafficking-program/compass.cfm>.

<sup>14</sup> "ILO Work in Fishing Convention," International Labour Organization.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Mendoza and Mason, "Hawaiian Seafood."

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing," accessed May 5, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/e/oes/ocns/fish/illegal/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Stoakes, Kelly, and Kelly, "Revealed."

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Oliver Milman, "Obama to sign law banning US imports of fish caught by slave labor," *The Guardian*, February 16, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/16/obama-ban-fish-imports-slavery>.

<sup>24</sup> *Laudato Si'*, §124.

<sup>25</sup> Pope Francis, "Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace," January 1, 2015, 4, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141208\\_messaggio-xlviigiornata-mondiale-pace-2015.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20141208_messaggio-xlviigiornata-mondiale-pace-2015.html).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Encyclical letter for the twentieth anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*, Vatican Web site, December 30, 1987, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html), §38.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, ed. David Knowles (1467; repr., Harmondsworth, UK: Pelican Classics, 1972), XIX.15.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), *Ep.* 10\*. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to Augustine will be from this letter and cited in text.

<sup>31</sup> Pope Francis, "Message of His Holiness," 6.